

ARTICLE

What Is Conflict of Interest?

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An interesting brief article concerning sources of potential conflicts of interest (COI) appeared relatively recently in *Ethical Editing*, the newsletter of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)¹. To set the stage, the editorial first presents the following succinct definition of COI, which appeared in 2009 in a report issued by the Institute of Medicine ²:

{C}ircumstances that create a risk that professional judgments or actions regarding a primary interest will be unduly influenced by a secondary interest’.

The COPE article then outlined several secondary interests ranging from professional advancement of the authors to requests for favors from colleagues, friends, or even family

members that might unduly sway the actions of authors. Monetary rewards to authors for having their articles appear in high impact journals are one source of COI. For example, one of the editors of *The Lancet*, indicated in the newsletter article (in what must have been a personal communication as no source was provided) that a Chinese author received almost \$90,000 for having his paper published in her journal. The higher the impact factor of the journals the greater the monetary rewards provided to the Chinese authors. *The Lancet* editor went on to note that in many instances the funds received from publishing papers in ‘prestigious’ scholarly journals are greater than the authors’ yearly salaries.

In other situations, the authors may not receive direct financial

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¹ Committee on Publishing Ethics. (2010). Playing the publishing game: Conflicts of interest in academic publishing. *Ethical Editing* 2(4):5-6.

² Institute of Medicine. (2009). Conflict of Interest in Medical Research, Education, and Practice. Lo, B. and Field, M. J., editors. National Academy of Medicine: Washington DC, 440.

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support, but external funding sources may look more favorably on grant applications received from authors who have had their research appear in international scientific publications. An editor of a Brazilian journal noted (in again what must be considered a personal communication) that considering the support of the authors' laboratories and graduate students rests on the approval of their grants, there is tremendous pressure on scientists to have their work appear in 'favored' journals. This can contribute to another form of COI: responding to requests from colleagues for inclusion as authors despite their rather dubious associations with the studies described in the articles. Perhaps it is also one of the factors contributing to a steady increase in the number of individuals listed as authors on submissions I have received over the last few years. It stretches the limits of credulity that the 14 or more individuals included on some papers, which are fewer than 20 double-spaced manuscript pages, have met the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) requirements for authorship³. Specifically, the ICMJE code of ethics indicates authors must 1) have made substantial contributions to the conception and design, acquisition of and/or analysis and interpretation of data; 2) participated in the drafting of the paper or its revision relative to its intellectual content; AND 3) have read and approved the final manuscript prior to its submission to the journal. Note the use of 'and' infers individuals must meet all three standards to be listed as authors.

It has been my experience as the editor of a small STM (scientific, technical, & medical) journal that authors frequently do not fully describe the materials and methods employed

in their studies. This would obviously make it extremely difficult for others to repeat the authors' studies in order to verify the results and confirm the conclusions. In the majority of instances this oversight is attributable, in part, to the authors' familiarity with the undefined abbreviations, methods, and equipment and their assumption readers must be equally conversant with what the authors consider common techniques. Another innocent explanation might be the authors were forced to summarize these types of details so their papers meet the page limits of the journals. However, the absence of detailed methodological information could stem from COI on the part of authors to ensure their positions in the scientific community and advancement within their departments and institutions by delaying or preventing the publication of collaborative work. Unfortunately, this form of COI rests on anecdotal information that cannot be verified as suggested in the COPE article.

It's not only authors who may fall prey to COI, but reviewers too may attempt to ensure their positions or improve their chances of grant funding or extend a courtesy to colleagues by delaying or sabotaging the publications from competing laboratories. The peer-review system is predicated on the professionalism of those who volunteer to serve as external, objective arbitrators of the quality of manuscripts submitted for publication. However, it is probable, based again more on anecdotal information than hard figures, a percentage of reviewers negatively skew their evaluations so their rivals' papers are rejected. On the other hand, reviewers may provide positive assessments of works submitted by colleagues with whom

³ International Committee of Medical Journal Editors. (2009). Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals: Ethical Considerations in the Conduct and Reporting of Research: Authorship and Contributorship. Available at: http://www.icmje.org/ethical_1author.html.

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they have professional or personal relationships. To prevent such situations, the editors of an increasing number of journals have instituted double-blind review policies in which the identities of the reviewers are unknown to the authors and, possibly more importantly, the authors' identities are unknown to the reviewers. In addition, many editors have established requirements that proscribe reviewers, for a specified number of years, from having collaborated in research projects or being included in earlier papers of the authors whose work has been assigned to them. Another form of COI involving reviewers is their use of information contained in submissions to advance their own research. Despite the fact submissions are considered by almost all journals as privileged communications, an unknown but probably small percentage of reviewers, especially those in well funded and equipped laboratories, use the contents of papers they receive to quickly design new investigations or revise existing protocols in order to generate their own papers.

I would be derelict if I didn't include potential COI on the part of editors in this discussion. The role of the editor or editor-in-chief may vary from responsibility for the

general oversight of the review process to detailed management of all editorial office activities even to proposing the specific line-up of papers to be included in the next issue. However, one of the roles shared by the majority of editors is making the final decision as to the acceptance or rejection of submissions. We expect, as we do with authors and reviewers, editors will act in an objective and professional manner in making these potentially far sweeping decisions. In addition, the editors' final decisions usually are based on the recommendations of reviewers, associate editors, or members of the journal's editorial board. The ever increasing number of submissions being received by many journals causes the editors to be more reliant on such external counsel and to take less direct involvement in the evaluations of papers. This creates a COI between the editors' responsibilities to maintain the quality of papers published in their journals through their own direct input and the editorial office production demands to secure, in a timely manner, sufficient numbers of manuscripts for succeeding issues. The pressures exerted by authors to minimize the turnaround times between the submission of their manuscripts and first decision, as well as from acceptance

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In the first installment of ISMTE's 'Interview with an Expert' series, Kathy Brister, managing editor of the *Journal of Applied Microbiology* and *Letters in Applied Microbiology*, speaks with publishing ethics expert Liz Wager, chair of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). Their lively discussion focuses on the key issues surrounding conflicts of interest (COI) in journal publishing. Listen to the podcast now and learn how COIs are defined, advice on developing and implementing a sound policy, what to do when COIs are undisclosed, and much more!

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to final publication (online or print) create another source of potential COI for editors. To reduce the turnaround delays would require a delicate balance on the part of editors between the time required to be more directly involved in all aspects of the editorial operations and the needs of their own careers. I have half-jokingly suggested retired status should be one of the qualifications to serve as an editor-in-chief in order for the person to have sufficient time to appropriately manage an STM journal in these rapidly changing

times in the world of scholarly publication.

One can only speculate the seemingly increasing numbers of retractions of published papers by high impact, prestigious journals is due, at least in part, to COI pressures, including those described in this article. I believe such pressures ultimately influence the judgment of authors, reviewers, and editors.



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